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Montgomery schools' budget balloons over past decade

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May 11, 2010

Montgomery County Public Schools' tax-supported operating budget has grown by more than 75 percent in the last decade, far outpacing the growth of other county agencies.

Even this year, as the county and schools fight over potential cuts to the schools' funding and the county faces a \$1 billion shortfall, the schools' share of the budget is poised to grow to 57 percent of all agency operating budgets, the most in more than 11 years.

The figures, compiled by County Council staff, are giving ammunition to some county lawmakers who are pushing for a reduction in school funding as a way to prevent more drastic fiscal measures elsewhere.

"The school system needs to be asked to help more," said Councilman Phil Andrews, D-Gaithersburg/Rockville.

County government's share is about 34 percent of the county's \$4 billion budget, while the county's parks and planning budget has grown 30 percent in the last decade.

The county is trying to bridge a nearly \$1 billion budget gap. County Executive Ike Leggett has proposed funding the schools at the same amount as this year while other county departments see their budgets cut by more than 20 percent next fiscal year. Leggett also is asking that one-fifth of county employees take 10 days of unpaid leave while leaving school employees alone.

Leggett also is proposing doubling the county's energy tax, a move the business community says will unfairly burden local companies.

To offset the proposed energy tax increases and spread the budget pain in what it considers a more equitable way, the County Council has expressed support for furloughing school employees, who make up two-thirds of the county's work force. A five-day furlough would trim the schools budget by more



Montgomery County Public Schools' budget is set to continue growing this year as the county battles a \$1 billion shortfall. (Greg Whitesell/Examiner file)

than \$30 million.

The County Council can control only the amount distributed to the school system, not how it is spent. School officials have pushed back hard against furloughs or any decrease in their budget and have threatened a lawsuit.

Doug Prouty, head of the Montgomery County Education Association union, said the school's current share of the budget is appropriate given the growth of poorer and special needs students in the county. Prouty said the county can use its reserves to avoid furloughs for all county employees. Leggett has proposed boosting reserves to maintain the county's AAA bond rating.

Schools Superintendent Jerry Weast has amped up his rhetoric, telling Fox 5 that cuts from the County Council would cause "irreparable harm."

"When we have our kids at risk, their entire future, we'll do everything we have to do," Weast said.

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